

11th August 2021

Blest

“Tis not for mortals always to be blest.”

John Armstrong, The Art of Preserving Health (1744)

Dr John Armstrong was a physician, poet and satirist who lived in the 18th century. His father was a minister of Castleton in the Scottish Borders, and John was the first to graduate “with distinction” from the medical school of Edinburgh University. In 1744, while working in his medical practice in London, he wrote his poem, *The Art of Preserving Health*, which, at first glance, might be considered a somewhat unpromising subject. But in it, John Armstrong points to some important truths, not the least of which is the one quoted above, that it is “not for mortals always to be blest”.

It is a truism, yet it is worth emphasising, that we will not always be blessed in life. In the Bible’s Book of Job, you have a man who, more than most, knew the truth of John Armstrong’s affirmation. And so did those around him. In chapters four and five, one of Job’s so-called “comforters”, Eliphaz the Temanite, is giving Job a hard time for complaining about his misfortunes. “It comes to us all,” he insists, “so why should you moan at God for your times of trouble?” It’s summed up in his words from Job 5:7:

Man is born to trouble as sure as the sparks fly upwards.

Dr John Armstrong is right. It’s a given. We are not “always blest”.

If that’s true, then acceptance of that must be as much a part of “preserving health” as it is to find solutions to our troubles. In a real sense, this is the message of the Book of Job. It is a fruitless exercise to expect life to be trouble-free. Indeed, when we struggle with the vagaries of life, it changes little if we complain about being dealt with unfairly. It’s surely better to begin to accept the imperfections of life – “naming our demons” – to find ways in which we can process our troubles and move on.

Thomas Paine, in *The American Crisis* in the 18th century, said:

I love the man that can smile in trouble, that can gather strength from distress, and grow brave by reflection. ‘Tis the business of little minds to shrink; but he whose heart is firm, and whose conscience approves his conduct, will pursue his principles unto death.

A prayer for today

When I am blest, let me give thanks.

When I am troubled, let me look to you for a firm heart. Amen